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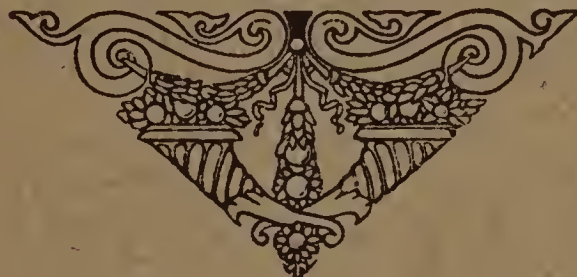
# The Christmas Bride

(FELIX AETERNUS)

A CHRISTMAS PLAY IN THREE ACTS  
INTERSPERSED WITH SINGING

By Rev. Andrew Klarmann, A. M.

FOURTH EDITION  
REVISED AND ANNOTATED  
... *Printed as Manuscript* ...



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## IMPORTANT

1. The royalty on this play is fifteen dollars (\$15.00) for each performance on the stage, whether public or private, to be paid to the author. This text is manuscript, and is printed only for convenience.

2. The notes and spacings by dashes and italics in the text are for the direction of young players, and not for the grammarian. The chief difficulty with young amateurs is to keep them from galloping through their lines, and to make them see that what they are saying and doing is interwoven with what everybody else on the stage is saying and doing.

3. For No. 12 of the score, the setting found in this text may be substituted, if desired; especially as it must be sung unison at its repetition in the same act.

THE AUTHOR.

## CAST OF CHARACTERS.

FELIX AETERNUS .....The Holy Child.  
BELLA.....The Christmas Bride  
EDITH.....The Mother of Bella  
AGNES.....A Sick Friend of Bella  
MARION.....The Mother of Agnes  
NANCY (Rhoden).....The Maiden Aunt of Bella  
MAID (of Nancy).  
ROBERT.....A Boy Friend of Agnes  
BESSIE, the leader—and a number (more than twelve) of other  
school girls, classmates of Agnes, in the First Act.

CATHERINE, MOLLY, and nine others, in the Second Act.

CHORUS of at least six female voices, to sing the various  
choruses, and to assist the children's singing as indicated  
in the score.

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## NOTES.

1. All the Girls in the first act are dressed in white, uniformly—for that surprise party.

The Girls in the second act appear in plain school frocks. Babette in well-worn clothes and shoes: she is the "rag-doll."—These girls must not be the same in both acts.

2. The *Maid* may be any one of the chorus.

3. The garb of *Felix*: A white gown of silk with gold borders at collar and sleeves and suitable cincture; white stockings and sandals. His hair should be light or brown and curly: the traditional picture of the Holy Child, as, for example, the Boy represented among the doctors in the temple (*Imhoff*).

# The Christmas Bride

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## ACT I.

SCENE.....*A Sick Room. AGNES, composed in an easy chair, (Morris chair) clad in a dainty wrap (or kimono). She is reclining her head on the pillows, with eyes closed, and hands folded over her coverlet. Opposite her position—a small table prepared for the sick-room.*

*In the center, to the rear, a shrine with a statue of the Holy Infant upon it. The shrine is draped with curtains running on rings (to insure smooth running) and suspended from semi-circular rods. The rods are fastened on the background of the shrine. The curtains should be made of white material lined with pale blue, and the background of the shrine should be covered with the same material as the lining of the curtains. Two neat candleholders with (unlighted) candles should be placed on the shrine.—The shrine must be so constructed as to support a boy of 10 or 12 years.*

*Simultaneously with the rising of the curtain, the CHORUS begins to sing behind the scene.*

*At the line: “Be not afraid, etc.,” AGNES wonderingly opens her eyes, and then follows the singing attentively, and at the conclusion: “YOU ARE HIS OWN,” she smiles faintly with satisfaction.*

CHORUS (*behind the scene*).

1. The wind is high, the wind is wild—  
Be not afraid, you little child!  
The winter days are hard and long,  
And winter's song is bitter song.  
But when you sob, and when you sigh,  
Do not forget that God is nigh.  
In suff'ring you are not alone,  
You are His own: you are His own.

*Enter MARION (in mourning, with a vase of fresh flowers which she places on the shrine. Then, after a short pause of prayer, she proceeds to AGNES).*

MARION.....Are you comfortable, my child?—Can I do anything for you?—Do you wish for anything? (*Smooths the pillows*).

AGNES.....(*Sadly*).—Is this not Christmas, mother?—Where is our Christmas Tree?—(*Gravely*).—Has the Holy Child forgot us, too?—(*Drawing the cover close at her shoulders*): I am all cold and chilled.

MARION.....(*Kneeling down at AGNES' side*).—God has not forgot us, dear.—He was as poor as we are, that first Christmas night, when He came into this world.—He is dealing kindly by us, I think, after His own fashion, to let us *imitate* Him in His poverty.

AGNES.....Yes, mother, I believe it:—God is good, even when He chastises us.—He Himself chose to be laid on straw, in a manger, in a stall!—Oh, I am satisfied! I am much more comfortable than He was.

MARION.....(*Laying a hand on Agnes' head, caressingly*).—Godspeed to my plucky little martyr!

AGNES.....I wonder why the Son of God selected a lot of lowliness and pain?

MARION.....It is no mystery, dear, if we look at it from *our* side: there is so much lowliness and suffering in the world—and He wants to teach us by His example how to bear it.

AGNES.....But why does God not take all this misery away? He is all good and all powerful!

MARION.....Agnes, it is not God who makes this misery. It is man himself. God would have to take man away in order to stop sin. For it is sin that is followed by misery and suffering of all kinds.

AGNES.....(*Dejectedly*)—Then I am sick on account of my sins?

MARION.....No, child.—Sickness and other ills, it is true, were brought into the world by sin. But they are often allowed to overtake us as trials—to make us repent, and think of God.—Or, again, to purify our affections.

AGNES.....Yes, that is so.—We were taught it in school. But I never understood it so well.

MARION.....Ah, indeed, Agnes: misfortune is a faithful reminder of what we have been taught.—But now, dear, keep yourself as quiet as you can. Since you had that hemorrhage, this morning, you must not speak much—it is the doctor's orders. (*Arises.*)

AGNES.....O mother: I must die in any event. (MARION, *affrighted, quickly kneels down again.*)—So, please, let me chat a little this last Christmas of mine here on earth.

MARION.....(*startled and nervous*).—You must not think of dying, Agnes!—Let us pray to the Holy Child: He will give you back your health.—O Agnes! I cannot let you *die*.

AGNES.....I have already prayed very earnestly to-night.—And in the midst of my prayer, a little while ago, I thought I heard an earnest and most comforting song.—Now, you have often told me, mother, that children who hear the angels sing on Christmas night, must die—

MARION.....Of course, they must die—We all must die, Agnes.—It is an old fireside tale for which none wishes to be sponsor. You are so weak: I think you were dreaming. (*Soft prelude to Chorus.*)

AGNES.....No, no, mother dear.—Do you hear—?

(*During Chorus MARION and AGNES listen attentively, with heads close together and in close embrace.*)

#### CHORUS.

2. The Child from Heaven cometh down  
This blessed Christmas tide.  
Of blossoms bright He brings a crown  
To put upon His bride.—

(*The next two stanzas may be omitted.*)—

He seeks a pure and pious child  
To take into His house.  
A soul all fair and undefiled,  
To be His Christmas spouse.

A heart He seeks, a treasure chest,  
In which His grace to hide.  
O happy soul of Jesus blest  
To be His chosen bride!

(*During the following solo, MARION caresses the head and hands of AGNES.*)

AGNES.....Did I not tell you, mother?—(*Sings*):

AGNES' GOODBYE.

3. Goodbye to you, my mother dear!  
I feel the bliss of Heaven near.—  
I am so cold—this world is drear—  
Oh, let me go away from here!  
Come, mother sweet—(*lays her cheek on MARION'S*)—  
Oh, come with me,  
Our loving Lord and God to see!

CHORUS.

4. Forget it not that God is nigh  
Who hears your heart in anguish cry.—  
Oh, let the soul to Heaven fly—  
Do not delay your last goodbye!

MARION.

5. My child, my child, my only child!  
You must not dread the winter's storm.  
The winter's storm is cold and wild.  
But come to me! My heart is warm.

DUET, *behind the scene.*

6. Come to my heart, my love, my dear!  
(*Enter BESSIE: a look of sympathy at Agnes—then touches Marion on the shoulder.—Marion arises and follows Bessie a few steps to the rear, where they whisper together for an instant. Bessie asks whether or not she may bring in her friends.—MARION nods.*)

Where there is suffering, God is near.

CHORUS.

Come to my heart, my love, my dear!  
Where there is suffering, God is near.

(*At the last note, a number of children in white—more than twelve—enter slowly, with their hands folded, singing, and arrange themselves in a semi-circle around the room, facing MARION and AGNES. The larger—or—older—ones, among them BESSIE—close to MARION standing—and AGNES. BESSIE is bearing a white frock on her arm.*)

CHORUS AND CHILDREN.

7. O Holy Child from Heaven high!  
We long so much (*raising eyes*) to see Thee nigh.  
Come down to-night (*raising hands*), we pray to Thee,  
Our little friend (*point right hand at AGNES, laying  
left on right breast*) from suffering free!

O Holy Child, Our Savior fair,  
Laid in a manger chill and bare:  
Grant from Thy Heart of mercy mild  
The prayer of Thy suffering child!

(*The same gestures, where appropriate.*)

BESSIE.....(*the leader, steps out of line, and forward*).—We have arranged this little *surprise* for you, Agnes, to wish you a Happy Christmas.—We hope and pray—that you will soon join us again—in our games and at school.—(*Displaying the frock.*)—Here we bring you a small gift from us all, to show you that we have not forgot you in your suffering, but love you as much as ever.—(*Presents the frock.*)—

AGNES.....(*accepting*).—O my dear friends!—How good of you!—God bless you!—I shall wear this dress in Heaven.

GIRLS.....(*startled*).—Agnes! (*All moving forward, forming a smaller semi-circle, two or three deep, about AGNES and MARION, showing surprise and pain.*)

AGNES.....Yes, dear friends: my days on earth are numbered.—Mother, when we shall rise on the last day, shall we wear these same clothes in which we are buried?

MARION.....(*moved*).—No dear.—God will vest us with the robe of heavenly glory.—(*To the children.*)—Children, Agnes thinks she will die to-night. (*Commotion and fear.*)—She does not look so very ill, does she? (*Children shake their heads dubiously.*)

BESSIE.....(*dubious*).—N-no, madame.—(*To AGNES, leaning over the chair, talking earnestly.*)—Agnes, I am sure you will not die.—We will not let you die.—I will stay with you all night—and we all will pray for you.—You will be well to-morrow, on Christmas Day.

(*Knocking at the door—opposite this group.*)

MARION.....Come in! (*To AGNES*):—Is it Bella? (*AGNES brightens up.*)

BESSIE.....No, I think not.—Bella is giving a “party” at her house this evening.

AGNES.....I know it, Bessie. (*Draws a card from under the coverlet.*)  
—I have a card from Bella.—I was to be one of her guests—but—(*hands the card to BESSIE.*)—

BESSIE.....It would, indeed, be a pleasure to be Bella’s guest.—She is the sweetest friend we have (*hands back card.*)

MARION.....I will see who knocked—(*goes towards the door, slowly.*)

BESSIE.....That must be a boy!—A girl could find her way in here without the assistance of an usher.

(*MARION opens the door. Robert stands motionless in the door for a moment, then proceeds—after bowing to MARION and making excuse as below—down front, opposite the group, MARION amusedly watching him.*)

ROBERT.....Excuse me, madame! But I could not open the door: I have both my hands full of doll!

*Enter ROBERT (with a large dressed doll in both arms.)*

BESSIE.....(*to the Girls*)—Just as I told you—!

ROBERT.....Good evening, ladies!

ALL.....Good evening, Robert! (*All smiling and bowing.*)—

ROBERT.....I wish you all a happy feastday. (*Advances to AGNES.*)

ALL GIRLS...We wish you the same, Bob. And many more.

ROBERT.....(*to the Girls, with a bow.*)—Thanks.—The same to you.  
(*To AGNES.*)—Agnes, my mother sends you and your mother her best wishes—and for you—(*holding doll up high*)—*this!*—(*Lays down doll on AGNES’ lap.*) Isn’t she a beauty?

AGNES.....Thank you, Robert!—And, please, give my sincerest thanks to your kind mother.

BESSIE.....Well, Bob, you *are* a good little fellow!

ROBERT.....Now, Bessie, wouldn’t you like (*walks away to former position*) to pat me a little for this?—Oh, if my mother had a girl—she would not send *me* out with a big doll.—But now I am glad, Agnes, that I did come.

MARION.....(*coming forward.*)—Robert, please, give my respects and thanks to your mother. It is very kind of her to remember us on this occasion. (*Gives ROBERT her hand.*)

ROBERT.....Don't mention it, madame.—My mother is good to everybody; even to me. (*MARION lays a hand on Robert's head.*)

BESSIE.....Well, Bob! Who wouldn't be good to you!

ROBERT.....Yes, Bess: You don't know—the inside history of a family—with *six boys* on the training list.—But I am out of place here, girls. This is a ladies' meeting. (*Bows.*)—Good night (*to MARION*). (*Walks over to AGNES, gives her a hand.*)—Good night, Agnes. (*To All.*)—Good night, girls.

(*AGNES and MARION respond immediately to ROBERT.*)

ALL GIRLS...Good night (*and fall to singing the chorus—the chorus behind the scenes assisting.*)

CHORUS (*on the stage*).

8. Good night, good night, good night to you,  
To every heart that's light and true!  
From Heaven come the angels bright  
To bid to all the world good night.

(*Both Choruses together.*)

To every heart that's filled with anguish,  
To every heart that's true and light.  
To those who laugh and those who languish:

(*Looking at AGNES.*)

To every child of God—good night!  
And to all the boys (*the girls bowing to ROBERT*)—  
(*ROBERT, bowing to the girls, alone*):  
and the good girls, too,

(ALL).....Let but their hearts be light and true:

Good night!—Come Holy Child! (*All eyes and hands upwards, until NANCY appears. She bursts in on them, quickly, and abruptly. Then, all are disturbed, and disappointedly fall back a step.*)

(*Enter NANCY.*)

NANCY.....(*sharply—with a look of disdain*)—Yes? “Come, Holy Child?”—(*shrugs a shoulder*)—Good evening!—Fine sight, indeed! A feast for a crowd, and you—(*to MARION*) owing me my rent for two months!—Madame, I want my my money—and I want it to-night.

MARION.....Miss Nancy, I have no money.

NANCY.....Ah, you have no money!—Not for me, of course.—But—  
(*points at dress and doll*)—you have had money for costly gifts.—You must pay your debts before you indulge your tastes: that's the first law of economy.

ROBERT.....(*lustily*).—Miss Flint: (MARION *winces*, NANCY *is stung to the quick*, the GIRLS *all exclaim*: Ah—!) That doll is a present from my mother. (ROBERT *shows himself nettled*.)

BESSIE.....And this dress is a gift to Agnes from her schoolmates.

NANCY.....(*haughtily to MARION*).—Madame, I will not be insulted in my own house! Remember it: My name is not—Miss Flint (*emphatically*).

MARION.....I am exceedingly sorry, Miss Rhoden. But Robert does not know you by your true name.

NANCY.....That boy is a precocious urchin of the street.—You should not tolerate him here.

MARION.....Pardon me, Miss Rhoden: but Robert is a good boy.

ALL GIRLS...(*saucily and emphatically*).—Yes, Robert is good enough for us!—(ROBERT *acknowledges the compliment by assuming a pose of dignity*.)—

ROBERT....Miss Rhoden, I am glad I know your right name now. I did not know it before this. I have sometimes heard other children speak of you as Miss Flint. And so I also made this mistake.

NANCY.....(*interested*).—And what else did *other children* call me, or say of me,—pray—my lord?

ROBERT.....Oh, they say many things of you:—That you have no consideration for the poor;—that you dispossess your tenants, even when they are sick—if they do not “come up” on the first—and the like.—A good *deal* more. But I have forgot it.—Only, they call you Miss *Flint*.—I shall not call call you *that* any more.

NANCY.....(*exasperated*).—You need not call me anything, you sorrowful snip of humanity.—(*Makes a lunge at ROBERT*). Get out of my sight!—(ROBERT *quickly runs over to MARION*.) (*To MARION*.) Come to terms now—

BESSIE.....(*interrupting*).—Miss Fli—(*conscious of her false pass*, BESSIE *lays a hand on her lips for an instant*—ALL GIRLS: —O-oh!).—Miss Rhoden: Robert's father will not have you call him a “sorrowful snip of humanity!”—Why, this is *awful*!—You had better apologize.

NANCY.....Bah, a fig for you all! (*Snaps her fingers.*)

ROBERT.....I shall keep this to myself.—I am not hurt.

MARION.....Peace, Robert! (*Pats his shoulder.*)—May God keep you so!—(*To NANCY.*)—But, Miss Rhoden, I can make no payment now.—Lately misfortune has been clinging to our heels like our very shadows.—This child's father (*points to AGNES*) is dead only a month, after a long and severe term of sickness.—And now, since father died, Agnes has not been herself again.—She is wasting and pining away, and requires constant care. I have barely had time enough to *earn the little*—that has enabled us to keep the wolf from the door.

NANCY.....Oh now! No harrowing tales of woe.—They will not move me.—I want my rent.

GIRLS.....How hard she is!

BESSIE.....(*aside*).—She should be called “Miss Adamant.” (*BESSIE, with a scowl, runs and closes the veils of the shrine.*)

MARION.....It is Christmas Eve—Nancy (*coaxingly*)!

NANCY.....I know it.—A day of plenty.—That is what brought me here.—But, please, drop all familiarity. It will not avail with me.

MARION.....Have mercy, for God's sake!—My child—(*NANCY looks at AGNES—AGNES makes a futile effort to extend her arms towards NANCY—NANCY turns away, shuddering*)—is sick unto death.—(*Desperately*): You would not evict us in this plight?

NANCY.....(*without turning to MARION*).—I want my rent.—I must live, too.

MARION.....Give us time, please!—For the love of the poor Christ, Our Savior!

BESSIE.....(*To NANCY*).—Have you no spark of pity in your breast—?

NANCY.....(*wickedly*).—I tell you for the last time—(*All Girls are taking a step forward, with energy, as if ready for an attack on Nancy*).—Give me my—(*the piano anticipates*):—Money!

CHORUS (*behind the scene*).

(*During the chorus, Marion and Robert retreat to the shrine.*)

9. Money, to hoard and to hold! (*The children gather close around Nancy.*)

A bagful of glittering, curse-laden gold,  
To pave me the way and level it well,  
The way to perdition, the highway of hell.

NANCY. . . . . (*frantically*).—What is this!

(*Children fall back and join in the singing—taken a-back at Nancy's fear*).

“Now rest thee, my soul! Thou hast plentiful fare.  
Now rest thee from labor, and trouble, and care.—  
Thou fool!—(*The children point their fingers at her*)—  
Thy money drops from thy hand.  
This night thou shalt in judgment stand:  
And all thy wealth, if thou do not mend,  
Will not be enough to buy thee a friend.”<sup>x</sup>)

(*NANCY utters a groan, and stopping her ears, exit.—The girls all clap their hands.*)

ALL GIRLS. . . Good riddance!—At last she is taking a hint!

BESSIE. . . . . (*briskly*)—What do we want with a vampire in our midst!

MARION. . . . . (*coming forward—ROBERT following her with his eyes*)—  
No, children, *no!*—Do not say it!—Now that she is mad-  
dened unto fury,—beware—lest she will aggravate our  
troubles!

BESSIE. . . . . There's not a trouble—but will yield to prayer: I would  
not rack my soul with idle fears.

MARION. . . . . God bless your faith, dear child!—I will take heart.  
(*Kneels down at AGNES' side, all kneeling with her in  
semi-circle, ROBERT at left end.*)

Good God, who dost *not* thrust aside the poor,  
I offer Thee myself, my child: my all.  
Have *Thou* compassion with my troubled soul,  
And give me strength to bear my cross in patience.  
Who camest from on high, down to this earth,  
As poor as we—pray, help us, lest we sink!

(*MARION buries her head in AGNES' arms.*)

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<sup>x</sup>) Paraphrase of Luke, 12.19.

ROBERT. . . . . (*walking over, quickly; lays a hand on Marion's shoulder.*)  
Madame, I have something in mind.—My father is rich,  
and good.—I will tell him of your plight—and ere the holi-  
days are by—trust me—your troubles shall be mended.

MARION. . . . . God bless your noble heart!—(*BESSIE takes ROBERT by the  
hand—and goes to the shrine where they part the cur-  
tains.*)—

BESSIE. . . . . Friends, let us lay our hearts into His (*points to the shrine*)  
hands—one with His heart that loves us all so well.—And  
as these hours with chant angelic ring—Kneel down— and  
with the angels let us sing!

*(All kneeling, facing the shrine.)*

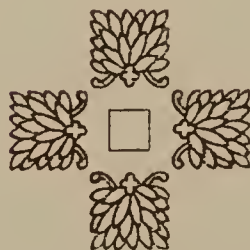
CHORUS (*Children and Chorus*).

10. Thou wert so poor, my Saviour meek,  
That holy night, with love so bright!  
The tears were glistening on Thy cheek,  
Poor Child Divine, that holy night.

Thou wert so poor, so lonely laid,  
That holy night, in Heaven's sight.  
A manger bare and hard, Thy bed,  
That night so bright with Heaven's light!  
Now take my burning heart from me!  
It is aglow with love of Thee.

*(Illumination and Curtain.)*

END OF FIRST ACT.



## ACT II.

SITTING ROOM IN THE HATTON HOME.

SCENE: . . . . . *A Christmas Tree. Twelve parcels, neatly done up in the colors of the season, on a table near it. Under the table a footstool.—EDITH and BELLA putting the finishing touches on the ornaments. NANCY, in street wear, seated to the side, forward, uneasily and wearily watching them.—BELLA is in white.*

NANCY. . . . . *(arising nervously).*—Excuse me, pray!—I must go home to attend to things a little myself. *(Aside.)*—Such waste of time and good will!

EDITH. . . . . *(coming forward).*—Can I not persuade you, sister, to stay? It will gladden your heart to remain with us. You will witness the happiness of innocent childhood. It will recall the happy days of our own early life together at home.—Do you know, Nan, I am proud of this tree!—The sight of it will transport those poor wights with ecstasies of joy. *(BELLA quietly applauds the sentiments of her mother as expressed.)*

NANCY. . . . . *(testily).*—Edith, I do not understand that you, who were reared in refined surroundings, should find pleasure in mixing with the poor—the squalor and coarseness of poverty.—These urchins will soil and ruin your carpets. And when they begin to frisk and frolic about, they will scratch or break your furniture.—Avast!—I will have none of this! *(Moves to leave.)*—I want to be out of here before your swarm of beggars arrives.

BELLA. . . . . *(coaxingly taking NANCY'S arm).*—Please, do stay, aunt dear!—The children who are to be our guests are good and clean children.—Their parents are not wealthy, but they are respectable people.—And, please, aunt, do not overlook the spirit that moves us to do this—

NANCY. . . . . *(scornfully).* Something very deep and pious, and religious—of course?

BELLA. . . . . Please, aunt, do not sneer at religion and piety!—We cannot live without them.

NANCY. . . . . Perhaps *you* could not, Bella—I can.

BELLA. . . . . But the poor can not.—They have *little* of the Christmas cheer that contributes so *much* to our happiness.

NANCY.....Eating and drinking does not make anybody happy—

EDITH.....Yes!—But just try, Nan, to be happy without a good, square meal, at least once in a while.

NANCY.....Humph!

BELLA.....We are receiving our guests in the name of the Holy Child, who came down from Heaven upon this earth, making Himself *poor*, that He might enrich the poor, and warm up with His divine love the hearts of those who have earthly goods in abundance.

EDITH.....(*caressing* BELLA).—Well done, my child!—This is the true Christmas spirit.—(*To* NANCY).—“Who receives one of these little ones,” *He* said, “in my name, receives me.”—And we are about to receive a whole troop of them.—Stay, please, Nancy—now?

BELLA.....Yes, aunt; please, stay with us.—I know—the joy of these children will touch your heart, and you will pray with greater devotion at the midnight Mass.

NANCY.....(*beginning to waver*).—Well, as to my heart’s being touched, I would take a chance.—But as to attending Mass—that is settled.—I do not intend to go.

(BELLA is scandalized. EDITH frightened: they exchange looks of pain.)

EDITH.....Nancy, how can you say such a thing!—We are all going, as is the custom of the family. (*Taking hold of* NANCY *by the arms*).—You will surely come with us, Nan?

NANCY.....(*sharply*).—No!—I think not.—And I will tell you the reason, why: I have come to despise this whole community.—They are a set of snobs and frauds.—They are mercilessly pouring out their wrath and envy over my head. They have dubbed me “Miss Flint!”—But I have a score to settle with some of them who owe me money.—Oh, it is the old story: I am the “maiden aunt.” Therefore every one feels free to pity and despise me.—No, I shall not go to church here any more; neither to-night nor at any time!

EDITH.....But, Nancy, you do these people wrong.—The fault is all on your side.—Let me be frank with you as your sister should be: You have lately been leading a rather solitary and retired life. You are going out of the way of every one, rich or poor. You have succeeded in nursing

your solitude into an obsession. And you are *persuading yourself* that the *timidity* of your neighbors is due to lack of respect and sincerity.

NANCY.....And is that *sobriquet*, "Miss Flint," perhaps a mark of respect and sincerity?

EDITH.....It is not your social equals who call you such.—The children of the poor have—probably—never known your true name.

NANCY.....And from whom, do you think, have the children of the poor learned to call me "Miss Flint?"

EDITH.....Well, Nan, you have frequent occasions to—to—to *meet* the poor—and—(*confused*).

NANCY.....And—what?

EDITH.....You can easily surmise what I would wish to say, but I shall refrain for Bella's sake.

NANCY.....Oh, you may as well say it.—Bella is my niece. She should know me through her mother.

BELLA.....(*rushing to EDITH hastily*).—Don't, please, mother!—You wanted to remind aunt of her tenants: (*noticing the false pass she has made, BELLA is confused, and lays a hand on her lips for an instant. EDITH gives BELLA a quick look of painful surprise.*)—Don't, please! (*Recedes.*)—Oh, how it pains me to think that Christmas comes so near the end of the month!

NANCY.....I trust you do not consider it a matter of your tender solicitude for the poor—to superintend my collections of rent? (*Bella walks away, saddened.*)

EDITH.....Come, come, Nancy!—Let us drop this *ungodly* subject. Take off your hat and coat, and lend us a hand in our work of charity!—And at midnight you come to church with us!

NANCY.....You are very kind—and curt, Mrs. Hatton!

EDITH.....Why should I not be curt with you, Nan!—Christmas is the most beautiful of feasts—a great birthday party for the whole world.—We must not fly away from sunshine: and we must not pass God by when He comes so close.

NANCY.....(*irritated—moving across the room*).—Oh, let God take care of those who need His help.—I do not need it—(*piously folding her hands*)—thank God!

(EDITH and BELLA are shocked.)

EDITH.....(*lays a hand on Nancy's shoulder*).—Sister!—It is not your *heart* that speaks this—I wanted to say—blasphemy. But it is, pardon me—silliness!—You rail at God and thank Him—all in one breath.

NANCY.....(*with a nervous little laugh*).—There now, Edith! You are the younger of us, but you are also the cooler and the wiser. (*Takes off her hat.*).—But I do not promise that I will go to church with you. (*Takes off her coat.*)—However I will give you my services in making people happy—if you *will have it your own way*.

(EDITH and BELLA exchange looks of triumph.)

EDITH.....(*kissing NANCY. At the kiss, NANCY winces*).—Thank God for this victory—of *yours*!

(*As EDITH, BELLA, and NANCY are taking a few steps towards the table and the tree, eleven girls come rushing in, running and skipping gleefully.—NANCY immediately, with disgust, turns away, and seats herself at extreme left.—EDITH and BELLA, one at right, the other at left of the tree which the girls surround, receive the children, taking hold of the small ones and directing them to the tree.—As the girls come in, they shout loud—not boisterously—their salutations*):

GIRLS.....Merry Christmas, Bella—Mrs. Hatton—and Miss Rhoden!

EDITH AND BELLA—Merry Christmas, children.

GIRLS.....(*surrounding the tree*).—Ooh,—how glorious!

(*Then they sing, spontaneously*):

#### CHILDREN'S CHORUS.

11. Holy night, silent night,  
Heaven's light streaming bright!  
Nestling by that God-blest pair,  
Lovely Babe so pure and fair:  
Slumber in sweetest repose!

Holy night, silent night!  
Son of God, our delight!  
Love doth beam and heavenly grace  
From Thy beautiful, gentle face:  
Welcome, Thou heavenly Child!

(The girls break the circle behind the tree, and arrange themselves on either side: six on the left—of the stage—and five on the right. MOLLY is nearest to the tree on the right (facing the opening), and CATHERINE is nearest the foot lights on the same side. BABETTE has the same position as CATHERINE, on the left of the stage.—EDITH, left center. BELLA, right center):

MOLLY.....(clapping her hands).—O Bella! This tree must have come down from Heaven!

BELLA.....No, Molly!—Angel hands can be found also here on earth.

BABETTE.....Where, Bella?—On you—perhaps!—Ours are not fine enough to do for *angels*.

BELLA.....*Charity* has angel fingers, Babette.—But, my dear friends —(NANCY squirms)—I have here twelve parcels for you, one for each: hats, shoes, warm frocks, dolls and toys, and sweets.

GIRLS.....(jumping) O goody, goody—Bella!

MOLLY.....Are our names on them, Bella? (BELLA nods her head.)

BABETTE.....Have you a doll for me, Bella? (BELLA smiles and nods.)

NANCY.....(aside)—Yes—but let it be a rag doll—she needs a partner (with a look of contempt at poorly clad BABETTE).

BELLA.....I have a doll for you, Babette. But it is too big to fit into a box.—You shall have it later. (Addressing herself to ALL).—I hope, girls, you will enjoy this Christmas as much as I.—Tomorrow you shall be my guests at dinner.—(NANCY throws up her hands.)

CATHERINE...I think you are Miss Charity and Miss Goodness and Miss Bella all in one.—God bless you!—You are *awfully* good, Bella.

ALL.....Thank you, Miss Hatton!—We will all be here.

BELLA.....Miss Hatton? (Looks quizzically at the girls.)—Well!—Since when this distance?

MOLLY.....O Bella—you are so *good*:—we cannot help admiring also how *nice* you are.

BELLA.....We will let this pass, girls.—Don't make me proud, please!—Now let me see: are *all* our guests come? (Counts silently).—Only eleven?—Who is missing?

CATHERINE...(and those on her side, sadly).—Agnes!—Poor Agnes!

BELLA.....What is keeping Agnes at home?—Why, she is my dearest friend!

CATHERINE...She is sick abed.—Her mother told me, with tears in her eyes, that Agnes needs more nourishment—and, I think, her mother, too.—And that Agnes is slowly dying.

MOLLY.....Yes, Bella: I saw Agnes only yesterday.—She cannot live much longer.—Isn't it too bad for the poor dear thing! (NANCY turns away her face and puts up a hand to hide it.)

EDITH.....Bella, this is the first I hear of their predicament.—If the condition of Agnes is so bad, you must visit them this evening and take the gifts yourself.

BELLA.....I am anxious to go, mother—(*much concerned*).

EDITH.....(*going to NANCY*).—Very nice people, the Frondens.—But the father has been ailing lately, I have been told, which must account for their present want.

NANCY.....Yes, I know them fairly well.

BELLA.....Oh, how painful it must be for the poor mother to see her child die!—And Agnes is the only one they have.—I wish I could die in her stead!

NANCY.....(*exasperated and frightened*).—Now listen to such foolish talk!—(*Briskly stepping up to BELLA's side.*)—You want to die!—What for?—Have you not everything you can desire?

BELLA.....Yes, aunt dear.—I am not dissatisfied.—But think of the suffering of the poor mother:—I know Agnes very intimately. She and her mother are but one heart and one soul.

EDITH.....(*very earnestly—struck to the quick*).—Bella dear: we hold our lives in trust from *God*.—Let *Him* dispose of them according to His wisdom and love! (*Embraces BELLA, pressing BELLA's head to her breast.*)

NANCY.....(*nervously*).—Do you think your mother would not feel the blow of your death so keenly as that woman will feel the death of her doll? (*BELLA does not react on NANCY's scolding.*)

CATHERINE...But Agnes is really a *dear* little *dear*.—So gentle in her ways, and now—so patient in her suffering.—It would pain me, too, if she would die.

NANCY.....(*flying at her*).—Will you keep still, you pesky parrot?—Can you not wait until someone asks you for your opinion?  
(*To EDITH.*)—It is running in the blood with them!

(CATHERINE *wipes her eyes with her pinafore—the four girls on her side take her in their midst, comforting her, and shooting “daggers” at NANCY.*)

EDITH.....(*taking NANCY by the hand*).—Peace, peace, Nan!—This loyal friendship of children should be a lesson to us.—(*Draws NANCY away.*)—Come!—Let them alone with Bella for a while.

(EDITH and NANCY *move to door at left, NANCY taking her hat and coat.—At the door, EDITH turns to the group and bows.—NANCY exit.*)

EDITH.....Good night, children!—God bless you!

CHILDREN....Good night, Mrs. Hatton!—God bless you *very much* (*emphatically*), Mrs. Hatton!

MOLLY.....Is that your aunt, Bella?

BELLA.....Yes, Molly. Miss Rhoden is my aunt.—Do you know—I am afraid she is ill.

MOLLY.....Well, she is certainly *cross* enough to be *very* ill.

BELLA.....(*regretfully*)—Molly!—(*Turns aside a little*).

CATHERINE...(*rushing to MOLLY—earnestly*).—Oh Molly!—You have touched a sore spot in Bella's heart:—Go and apologize to her.—You have hurt her feelings.

MOLLY.....(*goes to BELLA, takes BELLA's arm, and lays her head on BELLA's shoulder*).—Bella, forgive me, please! I am sorry—I have said anything unkind of your aunt.

BELLA.....I do believe that she is not herself to-night.—At all events let us not be harsh in our judgment. (*Caresses MOLLY and releases her. Now BELLA makes the table ready on which are the gifts.*)

BABETTE....That's right, Bella.—My mother told me *that* only this morning.

CATHERINE...Did you also say something unkind, Babette?

BABETTE....No—I only called baby a *crank*.—Mother said, baby was ill.—At any rate, baby was *very—very*—you know—!

MOLLY.....(*and those on her side*). Yes, Babette!

MOLLY.....(*alone*). All babies are *that* way, sometimes, you know—

BELLA . . . . . Come now, dears!—Fall in line—I want to distribute your gifts to you.

*(The girls move up—starting with the one nearest to the tree on the left of the stage, so that CATHERINE is the first at the table, and Babette the last.—Those on the left will move around the tree until the first one connects the line with MOLLY.—Each as she receives her parcel thanks BELLA with a bow and “Thank you, Bella”—“Merry Christmas, Bella”—“Happy Feastday”—or something similar, to avoid monotony.—After this, the girls will occupy their former positions, if they keep on moving to the last one.)*

FELIX joins the line at the end, entering quietly, following BABETTE. He is bare-headed, wears a worn cloak, and sandals, and his typical garb concealed.—BELLA mechanically hands him the last parcel, and he receives it, saying meekly: “God bless you, Bella!”—As BELLA looks up, he replaces the parcel on the table and lays a rose on it which he keeps covered under his left hand.—NOTE: The cloak can be made of worn material, of one piece, without sleeves or slits for the arms. When FELIX uses his left arm—he is facing BELLA from right center—he pushes it out at the opening, holding the cloak together inside with his other hand. The cloak—two inches shorter than the nether garment—should be fastened at the throat with a snap clasp which can easily be opened.)

FELIX AETERNUS—God bless you, Bella! *(The girls look up in surprise from their parcels.)*

BELLA . . . . . *(startled)*.—Well, well!—Now we have a twelfth guest, after all—and at that—a boy! (FELIX AETERNUS puts back his parcel, but keeps his hand on it.) Please, friend, keep your gift!—We shall have something else for AGNES.—But who are you?

FELIX AETERNUS—I am the brother of AGNES. *(Girls giggle and whisper to one another, keeping their eyes fixed on FELIX AETERNUS.)*

BELLA . . . . . I have never known Agnes to have a brother!

FELIX AETERNUS—I am *your* brother also. *(Girls laugh outright, not boisterously.)*

BELLA . . . . . *(coming from behind the table—close to FELIX AETERNUS—MOLLY also steps forward curiously eyeing the boy.)* Now you are joking.—Who are you?—Where do you come from?

FELIX AETERNUS—I come from above. (*No gestures; only his eyes aloft.*)

GIRLS.....(*awed*).—Oh—!—Bella!—(*Lay away their parcels on chairs and tables—in expectation of developments.*)

BELLA.....Dear boy—(*earnestly*)—what is your name?

FELIX AETERNUS—Felix Aeternus. (*Lights low.*)

BELLA.....(*fascinated—oblivious of herself*).—What a strange name!—(*To the girls.*)—But is he not a handsome boy!

MOLLY.....There is something wrong here, Bella.—I see some white under his coat.—I think he is a girl in spite of his fanciful name—and comes from Agnes.

(*Draws out a footstool from under the table and places it in front of the tree.*)—Come, Catherine, give me a hand: I want to raise him on a pedestal. (CATHERINE goes to MOLLY, and each places a hand beneath an elbow of FELIX).—Now just mount this throne, and let us see what you look like.

BABETTE.....Molly, you are going too far! (*Raises a finger in warning.*)

BELLA.....Molly, I am afraid you are toying with—somebody not of our kind!

MOLLY.....(*interrupting*).—With an enchanted prince, perhaps; or an elf escaped from the woods, this holy night. (*To FELIX.*)—Now rise, please, above these earth-born minions of yours; won't you?—(*They assist FELIX in mounting the footstool.*)—And now we shall reveal you to the world.—(*Opens the clasp at FELIX'S throat. FELIX instantly discards the cloak, and stands before them in the splendor of his real garments.*)

MOLLY.....Lord, what have I done! (*Falls on her knees, as all the rest, except BELLA.*)

FELIX.....(*To BELLA*).—Sister mine (*extending his arms*), I was hungry and you gave me to eat! (*Spot light, tableau.*)

## CURTAIN.

NOTE: The curtain remains down no longer than thirty seconds, if that much time is required to let FELIX disappear.—When it is raised again, all lights on the stage are out, and come up slowly, the girls singing with animation the following Chorus:

# No 12. O Child So Fair And Sweet

(As the lights are coming up)

A. KLARMANN



*a tempo*



1. O child so fair and sweet, Be - hold us at Thy feet,
2. O child from Heav-en come! Thou makest the earth Thy home:



*cresc.*



Sing-ing Thy praise, our voices we raise, With the angels Thy coming to greet .  
Glo-ry to Thee! Our love Thou shalt be, Till Thou take us, Thy little ones, home .



CHILDREN.

12. O Child so fair and sweet,  
Behold us at Thy feet!  
Singing Thy praise,  
Our voices we raise  
With the angels Thy coming to greet.

O Child, from Heaven come!  
Thou makest the earth Thy home:  
Glory to Thee!  
Our Love Thou shalt be,  
Till Thou take us, Thy little ones, home!

MOLLY.....(*arising—out of breath*).—Why, Bella! This all went off like a flash!—A poor boy—a pretty boy;—a beautiful light—and we singing like mad!—And now, all is gone!—Oh, I feel so shaky in my knees—I had better sit down. (*Sits on the floor.*)

CATHERINE...Oh, Bella! I feel as if somebody had run a knife clean through me.—But it does not hurt!—(*Dubiously.*)—I—I think I would like to see that boy again.—But *such* a shock!—I thought it was a ghost!

MOLLY.....(*up, quickly*).—Well, if all ghosts are as fair to look at as this one, I hope I shall see many more.—*Who* do you think it was, Bella?

GIRLS.....(*on left*).—Oh, Bella, tell us!—(*closing in on BELLA.*)—

GIRLS..... (*on right*).—Do, please, Bella!

BELLA.....(*thoughtfully*).—I am afraid—I cannot tell.—I dread even to *think*—it was the *Holy Christ Child*.

MOLLY.....(*frightened*).—No!—Please, no!—The *Holy Christ Child* is in Heaven.

CATHERINE...Yes—(*insistently*)—Molly!—But this is Christmas Eve:—The *Holy Child* comes down this night.

MOLLY.....No, no, Catherine!—Not down here, to us—would He?

CATHERINE...Then why did you sing to him?

MOLLY.....I don't know.—I couldn't help it, I suppose.—You were singing, too—and louder than I.—

BABETTE....I didn't sing.—I just looked on—and watched him.—I think I saw dimples in his face.

MOLLY.....Were you not afraid, Babette?

BABETTE.....Afraid?—I?—No. (*With an eye on the table.*)—He was so fine a boy—who could be afraid of him?—(*Points at the table.*)—And he left Agnes' parcel here, too!

BELLA.....(*taking up the parcel and the rose—surprised*).—True, true, girls!—(*Puts down parcel.*)—But look, here is also a rose—which he alone can have put here!

GIRLS.....(*on left, pressing upon BELLA*).—Oh, how pretty of him!

GIRLS.....(*on right*).—Let us see it, Bella!

BELLA.....(*ecstatically*).—A rose—the symbol of purity and love!

GIRLS.....O Bella, how he must love you!

BELLA.....(*fastens the rose at her bosom*).—I will wear it for Agnes.—Good God, if it *was* the *Holy Child*!

MOLLY.....(*excitedly*).—If it was the *Holy Child*?—Bella, please don't say it!—I tremble to think of it.—I touched him—and I called him a girl!—Oh, Bella, Bella! (*Runs to BELLA, and falls on her knees.*)—You must pray for me!

(*All girls are agitated—infected by MOLLY's excitement.*)

ALL GIRLS...(*Rushing to BELLA, shouting*).—Oh, Bella, Bella!—What shall we do! (*BELLA raises up MOLLY and comforts her, stroking her head.*)

*Enter EDITH and NANCY (excitedly).*

EDITH.....What is the matter?—(*Looks around.*)—Is the tree on fire?—What has happened?—Why are you so excited?

MOLLY.....(*wildly rushing to EDITH and taking hold of EDITH's shoulders or sleeves*).—Just think of it, Mrs. Hatton!—The Holy Christ Child was here!—And I unhooked his coat—and called him “names”—and wanted to pat his cheeks!—Oh, what will he do to me!

(*Rushes back to BELLA, hiding her face on BELLA's breast.*)

NANCY.....(*half sympathetically*)—I told you—you would have trouble with them.—The unwonted wealth has turned her head.—She is beside herself.

BABETTE.....(*steps up to NANCY*).—Yes, Miss Nancy: He was here.—I saw him smile at Bella.

EDITH.....Who was here?

BABETTE.....The Holy Christ Child (*emphatically*)—of course!

EDITH.....(*interestedly*).—Did he say anything?

BABETTE.....Yes, ma'm.—He told Bella not to forget the hungry and the poor (*raising a finger for emphasis*).—

NANCY.....There now!—You beggars are always hungry.—(*To EDITH*)—I'll tell you what all this means:—This ungodly talk and conduct of theirs is to show what they think of *me*!

EDITH.....No, Nancy,—I think not.—(*Points at BABETTE.*)—This baby surely is innocent of fraud and deception.—(*To BELLA.*)—Bella—(*thoughtfully*)—what is there of this confusion and excitement?

BELLA.....Mother, I am moved in my innermost soul.—I can form no clear thought. (*Fascinatedly.*)—I see before me a halo of the bright hues of the rainbow—and a sweet faced boy within it, beckoning me to follow him.—I feel like flying away—higher and higher—up to the gates of Heaven.—(*Coming to herself, brushing over her eyes.*)—Oh, I do not know what I am saying! (*Taking hold of EDITH's arm.*)—But, mother, he was so beautiful!

EDITH.....(*putting an arm around BELLA's shoulders*).—Who, my child?

BELLA.....That—Felix Aeternus.

NANCY.....(*wonderingly*).—What a name! (*Harshly.*)—They are all gone daft!

EDITH.....Who is Felix Aeternus?

BELLA.....The boy who was here.

EDITH.....But was there anyone here in the short time that we were away?

BELLA.....Yes, mother.—Of that there is no doubt.—He came in like a poor boy. But he was so fair to see that my eyes seem to be veiled since he vanished.—And when he was gone—(*takes the rose from her breast*)—I found this rose on Agnes' parcel.

EDITH.....(*taking the rose*).—There is nothing extraordinary about this rose.—He may have bought it at *any flower store*.—(*Smells of the rose.*)—But it is rather too fragrant for a hot-house flower.

NANCY.....Yes—! Now-a-days these beggars have money for anything.

EDITH.....(*with a look of reproof at NANCY*).—You were singing, Bella—a little while ago?—And a *strange* melody it was to *me*: I have never heard it.

BELLA.....Were we singing, mother?

MOLLY.....Yes, we *were*!—That was when he disappeared, and we were left in the dark: then we all broke out into song.

EDITH.....(to MOLLY).—But what was it that you were singing?

MOLLY.....(*confused*)—I don't remember.—Do you, Bella? (BELLA *shakes here head quietly, thoughtfully.*) Or you, Catherine?

CATHERINE...No, I can not recall it; I was too scared to remember it.

MOLLY.....Or anyone of you, girls? (*All shake their heads in wonderment.*)

BABETTE.....(*forward*)—We sang—"Holy Night."

EDITH.....No, dear.—You sang that while we were still here with you.—(BABETTE *puts a finger in her mouth, and retreats.*—NANCY *scowls at the "dear."*)

MOLLY.....I think—if we—(*timidly*)—could see him again, we could also remember what we sang.—But I am afraid of him.—I am all gone to pieces.—My—intimacy—must have displeased him—(*sighing and leaning on one of the girls.*)

EDITH.....Something out of the ordinary *must have occurred.*—This talk is—(to NANCY)—too well pieced together to be without foundation.

NANCY.....Bah!—Their heads are turned, that's all. They cannot bear this sudden prosperity.

BELLA.....(*Looking into space*)—Mother, I think I can *recall* some of that song. (*Inclining her head in attitude of listening*)—I hear it sounding in my heart.

EDITH.....(*mystified*).—You can *recall* it, child?—Will you sing it for us—please? (*Looking BELLA over, dubiously.*)

BELLA.....I will try, mother.—Sing with me girls!

(*While BELLA is singing the first two lines, the girls eagerly listen and step closer to BELLA, until they surround her. At the third line they join in enthusiastically, all extending their arms and raising their eyes as in prayer.*)

BELLA (*devoutly*).

O Child, so fair and sweet,  
Behold us at Thy feet!

(*Girls joining in.*)

Singing Thy praise, our voices we raise,  
With the angels Thy coming to greet.

(*The second stanza is not sung here.*)

NANCY.....Is this the latest one you learned in school?—A Christmas hymn?

CATHERINE...If you will—please—excuse me, madame, and not scold me again, I will tell you something.

NANCY.....Well?—Speak up!

CATHERINE...This song is a brand-new one. We never sang it before this evening—did we, girls? (*GIRLS shake their heads.*)

EDITH.....I for one do not *understand* this *strange* occurrence.

NANCY.....There is nothing to *understand* in it.—It is a prank for delivery at *my* door—and a good one.

BELLA.....Mother, I think—also his *words* are coming back to my mind.

BABETTE.....Oh, Bella!—I know what he said.—He spread out his arms, like this—(*extends her arms*)—and said: “Sister mine, I was hungry, and you gave me to eat”—didn’t he? (*CHILDREN and BELLA nod their heads.—CHILDREN gently clap their hands.*)

BELLA.....Yes, these are his words.

NANCY.....That’s it, exactly!—I am going home.—This is an outrage! Good night! (*To EDITH.—NANCY exit.*)

EDITH.....(*wickedly—stamping a foot*).—Good night, Nan!—Come, children! Let us sing a hymn to the Holy Child!

MOLLY..... Yes, let us sing!—We owe him an apology.—At least I.—I hope he will forgive me that I called him “names.”

CATHERINE...But please, don’t sing too loud.—He might come back if he hears us—and I am *still a little afraid*.

BELLA.....Oh, come to us, Thou fairest Child! (*Sings the first two lines of the following hymn alone.—After that, all join in, also the chorus.—All kneel, except BELLA, facing the audience.*)

13. O Thou sweetest, fairest Jesus,  
Nevermore from us depart!  
At Thy feet, O Infant Savior,  
Let us lay our loving heart.

(*BELLA retreats and kneels down on the footstool or in front of the tree on the floor. FELIX enters unnoticed from left, and lays a hand on BELLA’S head deeply bowed. BELLA does not stir.*)

Do not in the stable tarry,  
From the manger set Thee free!  
Lo, our arms are ever open  
To receive and shelter Thee!

*Illumination—Tableau.*

CURTAIN.

## ACT III.

### SCENE I.—NANCY'S HOME.

(NANCY enters with a handbag.—Takes out, at the table, a case with a gold cross and chain which she handles lovingly.)

NANCY.....(holding the chain)—For Bella!—How proud she will be! (Lays the chain aside, in the case, and takes money out of her bag.) Now let us see the fruits of this grim harvest—(Counts money, but is abstracted—makes mistake—counts it over.—At last she pushes the money aside and arises.)—What a pestering and persistent thought!—As if I had nothing else to think about!—I have no rest since I left that house.—I am tempted to cast all this trash out into the street—for those merry little beggars to gather up and to make merry on.—

Those youngsters surely had lost their minds from sheer exuberance of joy over their unexpected wealth.—Ah, the days of happy childhood!—I can recall a time when I was happy—but that is past—alas! (With a sigh.)—Yes, there was a time when I could be *happy* over glittering trifles: as happy as that rag-doll Babette—or my own little queen Bella. (Toys with the gold chain.)—What did happen at that house?—That story of the children was not one concerted lie.—Children lie piecemeal.—It was not a hoax.—Bella would not join in such frolicking.—Besides, she was too serious—almost dissolved with some exalted emotion.—Yet I do not want to believe in miracles in this prosaic age.—Can it not be explained along natural lines?—As autosuggestion, perhaps!—But I feel my hair rising when I think of it.—There is the miracle of Lourdes—a singular manifestation of heavenly mercy—patent to all the world.—A gem fallen from the mantle of the Heavenly Queen!—Mary, the Mother of God!—Why did I not think of Her to-day—on this, Her day of honor and joy!—It would have helped me to suppress my peevishness, and to keep it from growing into downright savagery.—I should have been more gentle—no—Nancy!—you should have stayed at home to-night—knowing what this night means for you!—(Stands looking at the cross on the gold chain, and then sits down at the table.)

ENTER MAID.

MAID.....Miss Rhoden:—Miss Bella would like to speak to you.

NANCY.....(*joyously*).—Oh, let her come in! By all means, let her come in! (*Exit MAID*).—It will be a great relief for me to unbosom myself to my gentle Bella.—(*Arises.*)—God bless the dear child!—She is the only joy and solace that is left for me on earth.

*Enter BELLA (in street wear, holding a parcel—her sodality veil done up in paper package—in her hand).*

BELLA.....I beg your pardon, aunt (*laying a hand on NANCY's shoulder*), for disturbing you so late.

NANCY.....No excuses, dear, for you.—(*BELLA lays down her parcel in the arm chair she is to occupy presently.*) What have you there?—

BELLA.....My sodality veil, aunt.—If I have time after my belated visit to Agnes, I will go to Communion at midnight Mass. And if not—(*raises a hand, pointing upwards*).

NANCY.....And if not—what?

BELLA.....(*solemnly*).—Then the Lord will call me for my *permanent* union with Him.

NANCY.....O Bella! I wish you would stop this toying with your religion!—It gives me the chills to hear you talk so intimately of God.—*Get over it*—will you?—It is a disease with you!

BELLA.....But, aunt dear! What else are we here for but to love God and to do His will?

NANCY.....Why, child, you are mistaken!—Religion is a *medicine* for our *spiritual ills*—is it not?

BELLA.....It is, indeed!

NANCY.....Well!—Medicine must be taken in *small* doses, must it not?

BELLA.....Pardon me, aunt: but your comparison does not tally.—The ills of the body are only *temporal* ills.—The ills of the soul—easily may become *eternal* ills:—and eternal ills are incurable.

NANCY.....It is useless to argue any point of religion with you!—You are too full of it.—You are overflowing with it.—(*Kindly.*)—I had this condition of yours in mind when I ordered this (*displays the cross and chain*) for you. (*Puts*

*chain on BELLA.*)—I thought that a cross is the most fitting ornament for you—you little cross bearer.—(*Patting BELLA'S chin.*)—But now: what is the *news*?

BELLA.....Oh, aunt dear, what a beautiful gold cross!—Thank you! (*Kisses NANCY'S hand, but NANCY takes BELLA'S face into her hands and kisses her.*)—I am come to ask a favor of you.

NANCY.....That is granted, dear, before you ask it.—Sit down (*BELLA takes off her hat and coat, and sits down in a deep arm chair*),—and, first of all, tell me all about that trouble at your house this evening.

BELLA.....Yes, I also have been pondering over it.—As it is, however, I remember little of particular incidents.—It is all like a dream to me.—I cannot analyze the impressions of that blessed moment.—But they have left, as it were, a sweet wound in my soul. I feel—if you permit me to make a comparison—as a lamb might feel when about to be immolated.

NANCY.....Be that as it may, child.—What I am interested in is this: Did you really see anything *extraordinary*?

BELLA.....(*thoughtful*).—I think we *did*.

NANCY.....Oh, you *think* you did!—Well, “an open confession is good for the soul.”—Were you at that time talking about the crib, and the angels, and the shepherds?

BELLA.....No, aunt.—We would probably have come to speak of that beautiful event of Bethlehem, had we had time.—But I had first to give those children their presents.—And as I was doing so, the last parcel was received by a boy who had not been in the room before.—That parcel was intended for Agnes—you *know her*—the sick little daughter of Mrs. Fronden?

NANCY.....(*shrugging a shoulder*).—No insinuations, please!—Why did he not take the parcel with him?

BELLA.....If he *was* the Holy Child, aunt: does He need such things?—And if He was *not* the Holy Child—how could He manifest Himself amid a halo of light?—And would a *poor boy* buy roses at this season?—And for me?—And that mystical name: Felix Aeternus!

NANCY.....Huh, child, stop!—What does that name mean?—Can you tell me that?

BELLA . . . . . Yes, aunt.—I looked it up before I came here.

NANCY . . . . . (*eagerly*).—Yes!?!—Well?!—What do the wise men say?

BELLA . . . . . It means—“*He who is happy forever.*”—It means—

NANCY . . . . . Stop, stop, child!—I am getting the gooseflesh.

BELLA . . . . . (*arising and taking NANCY's arm*).—Will you not make me a present of Mrs. Fronden's receipted rent bills, aunt?—It is for this that I am come here.—My scant savings all have gone for Christmas cheer for the poor.—I have nothing left.

NANCY . . . . . (*reluctantly severe*).—Bella, you must not interfere with my business.—I am neither a miser nor a spendthrift.—My insistence on payments, when due—is not merely a matter of *getting money*.—It is as much a matter of “*getting even*” with those hereabout—who look askance at me—as the “maiden sister”—of the rich and *happy* Mrs. Hatton.

BELLA . . . . . If this is your business, dear aunt—give it up!—Cast it out.—It is an unholy thing!

NANCY . . . . . That is all you know about it.

BELLA . . . . . Aunt—please, consider that Mrs. Fronden is reduced to pinching want—Mr. Fronden is sick—

NANCY . . . . . No.—Mr. Fronden is *dead*!

BELLA . . . . . Dead!?!—Oh, aunt dear: I shall have to tell mother!

NANCY . . . . . Do—of course—do so!—By all means—you little busy-body!—Take my advice, Bella, and let me and my tenants alone.

ENTER MAID.

MAID . . . . . Mrs. Hatton, Miss Rhoden. (*Exit.*)

NANCY . . . . . (*aside*).—Alas my peace!—(*To BELLA.*)—Now, not a word of the Frondens!—Not a breath—do you hear me?

BELLA . . . . . (*anxiously looking about*).—Oh, that mother must find me here so late! (*Sits down in the deep chair.*)

NANCY . . . . . (*to herself*).—Another tilt with that doughty champion of the poor!—

ENTER EDITH.

EDITH . . . . . Good evening, Nancy, for the second time!—It is Christmas luck—an earnest of divine favor—to meet and greet friends twice to-night.—I am on my way to church—come with me, sister! People will be looking for you.—

NANCY.....I told you that I will not go to church.—I don't care for people, and people need not care for me.—Besides, I have no time.—I must set up a telegram to my bankers.—

EDITH.....Your bankers?—To-night?

NANCY.....Yes, to-night.—My bankers are not pious Christians.—It is a question of a cool quarter million.—But, of course, that is nothing to you.—You look to your husband for your support and contentment.

EDITH.....(*severely*).—Nan—how much will you take with you when you will die?—It is your insatiable greed for money that makes you so harsh—

NANCY.....(*sharply and deliberately*).—It is not!—

EDITH.....You surprise me, Nan!

NANCY.....You *ought* to know better.—It is the “*maiden aunt*” that is harsh, and not the landowner.

EDITH.....Nancy, in truth, yes; I should have known better.—I should have remembered what a sad chapter a certain Christmas Day forms in your past.—But can you not make a sacrifice of it to God—once for good and all?

NANCY.....Your consolation is cheap: you have your devoted family—

BELLA.....(*arising*).—Aunt, you know that we all love you as a second mother; that this house is our second home.

EDITH.....Are my family not as devoted to you as to me?—My girls spend as much time with you, as with me. (*To BELLA*)—But, child, you should be with your sick little friend!

BELLA.....Forgive me my tardiness, mother.—But aunt will tell you why I called here so late.

NANCY.....Now you put me in a fine stew!—You want *me* to tell why *you* are here!—A pretty *trick* of you, Bella!

EDITH.....I am not interested a bit in your reason for being late.—Let us go, or we both shall be late.

NANCY.....Oh, you may as well know it.—It will add glory to her (*points at BELLA*) crown.—(*Mock politeness.*)—Mrs. Hatton: Mrs. Fronden is a tenant of mine, and is in arrears with her rent.—My bashful Miss (*bows to BELLA*) here—would not visit them—before I made her a present of the receipted bills.—And I decline to be lectured into being “good.”—This is the whole story of her being delayed.

EDITH.....Give me the bills.—I will settle for them.

NANCY.....You offer me an insult, Mrs. Hatton! (*BELLA follows the tilt with signs of grief and regret.*)—Go and tell them that they owe me nothing.—But on the first, they must vacate their quarters. (*Stares coldly at them.*)—Well, can you not make up your minds to convey your message of charity?—(*EDITH stands wringing her hands—BELLA is in tears.*)—All right!—(*Takes up her handbag and money, wrapping all in the table cloth.*)—Make yourselves comfortable here for the night! (*Exit with her bundle.*)

BELLA.....(*pleadingly*).—Mother, let us go!

EDITH.....(*with determination*).—No, Bella.—Not after this challenge.—You stay here until I come back.—Miss Nancy has a good heart, but not a good temper.—I shall set her right in a minute—'see if I don't! (*Exit after NANCY.*)

BELLA alone. (*Lights low.*)

BELLA.....(*sits down in the arm chair*).—How little it takes to spoil so blessed a day!—Such holy memories crowding in upon the soul, and so much misery abroad!—Such wondrous tokens of the love of God, and so little charity among His children!—My heart aches to ponder it all!—Oh, would to the loving Christ—I could leave this wretched exile, and fly aloft, to rest on the bosom of God!

(*Takes up the cross pendant on the chain, and kisses it. Then she reclines her head on the back of the chair, and closes her eyes with the cross pressed to her breast with both hands.*)

(*After a short pause*):

ENTER FELIX AETERNUS. (*Lights up slowly.*)

(*FELIX AETERNUS appears in the traditional form—that is—in white garments, girdle, sandals.—He stands a little back of BELLA.—When he speaks, Bella does not look in his direction.*)

FELIX AETERNUS—Bella!—(*BELLA gives a little start of surprise.*) Go to that dying child!

BELLA.....(*opening her eyes and brushing with a hand over them*).—Am I dreaming? (*Holds up the cross to reassure herself.*)—I was about this moment, to salute Mary at the crib—and the new-born Son of God:—O Blessed Mother!—How long—how long yet (*longingly*) must I wait! (*Again composes herself for silent prayer.*)—

FELIX AETERNUS—Bella! (*BELLA again opens her eyes as before.*)—Go to your friend Agnes!

BELLA.....The thought of Agnes is haunting me!—

FELIX AETERNUS—Do not tarry!—Go!—She needs but the hand of charity to raise her up.

BELLA.....(*speaking into space.*)—Lord, I will!—(*To herself.*)—If mother only would come back!—My anxiety seems to me to be a premonition that Agnes is dying.—O God, what a happy child!—To be selected—so soon to enter into Thy glory!—Oh, how I long to die for her, and to celebrate this Christmas in Heaven!

FELIX AETERNUS—Bella, charity is acceptable before the face of God.—But it is a flower tinted with the blood of sacrifice—(*disappears—by stepping quietly into the wings.*)

BELLA.....(*taking up the same tone of voice, and continuing.*)—A glorious flower, aye, and yet, a modest flower.—(*Holds up the rose.*)—A flower from the garden of paradise.—(*Replacing the rose and rousing herself completely, arising, and extending both arms towards heaven.*)—I would like to die, Lord, and go hence!—

(*Lights lower.*)

(*BELLA stands in deep thought during the singing of the first stanza of the following chorus which must be rendered low, and soft.*)

#### CHORUS.

14. (a) Dear little ones hasten and come one and all,  
To sing to the Savior in Bethlehem's stall!  
Behold what a treasure of mercy and grace  
The heavenly Father hath stored in this place!

(*At the last two lines, BELLA kneels down at the table taking out her rosary.—At the conclusion, she modestly recites the following prayer:*)

BELLA.....O my sweetest, fairest Savior: Who didst leave Thy heavenly throne for us—to become a poor child amongst us!—If it please Thee—pray!—*spare* that child—and take *me*!—(*Modestly and lovingly.*)—If Thou wouldst have a Christmas Bride, place the wreath of Thy love on *my* brow!—My life and my love are Thine: move the heart of my aunt to pity and repentance—and let my little friend live for her mother!

(BELLA *lays her face into her hands at the table.—The chorus sings the following verses.—Small red and white flowers drop from above around her.*)

CHORUS.—(*This stanza may be omitted.*)

14. (b) Oh, see in the manger the beautiful Child,  
Enveloped in splendor, still glowing and mild!  
The Child come from Heaven, where every face  
Is fair with the radiance of goodness and grace.

CHORUS.

14. (c) Come, children, most precious off'ring to bring  
The Savior, who loves you, the Heavenly King!  
Present to Him, free from all seeming and art,  
The choicest oblation—(*pause*)—an innocent  
heart!

(BELLA *arises at the last line, wonderingly looking around in the air.*)—

BELLA.....Whence is this sweet song?—This is Christmas Eve—and the saying is—that during this blessed night—the air is filled with the chant of angelic choirs.—But—who hears it—cannot live!—O my good God!—Wilt Thou—in grace—accept my offering?—(*Rousing herself.*)—Am I entranced?—The atmosphere is filled with the sweet scent of lilies and roses.—(*Looking around, discovers flowers on the floor.*)—How are these flowers come here?—(*Stoops on one knee and takes up a few, arranging them in a bunch; caressing it.*)—Oh, the innocence and purity of your loveliness!—(*Becomes very thoughtful and serious, as by a sudden inspiration.*)—Ah, sweet Savior!—Thou dost accept my sacrifice!—(*Again surveys the flowers, and bends her face over those she is holding in her hand.—Then:*)—O fair messengers of a fairer lover!—(*Looks steadily aloft into space.*)—

*Enter EDITH (followed by NANCY, who takes cognizance of the flowers at once, picks up two or three, lays them on the table, and shows displeasure.)*

EDITH.....Bella, come!—You make your visit to Agnes, and I will proceed on to church.—Aunt Nancy will not go to-night.—She is feeling faint after all this excitement. (*Touching BELLA at the shoulder.*)—But what ails you, child?

BELLA.....(*abstractedly*)—Why, mother?—(*Looking into space.*)—

EDITH.....You are so impassive—so distant—so abstracted!

BELLA.....(*smiling at EDITH*)—I feel very well, mother.—I spent my time in prayer while waiting for you to return.—Prayer *has a tendency* of carrying us away—has it not, mother?

(EDITH *eyes BELLA wonderingly.*)

NANCY.....She is a religious enthusiast, and always has been.—Now just look here: she has strewn my carpet with flowers in a fit of her exaltation!—I think she is living through in her mind the whole Christmas story—singing with the angels and piping with the shepherds.—(BELLA *puts on her coat and hat.—Forgets her veil.*)—

EDITH.....(*indignantly*)—A most profitable way of spending Christmas Eve—I should think! (*Turns to leave.*)—Good night!

NANCY.....(*coldly—piqued*)—Good night!—You'll never rid yourself of your habit of lecturing!

BELLA.....(*kissing NANCY*)—I will pray for you, aunt.

NANCY.....Do, please!—I have no time for prayer.

EDITH.....(*turning around*)—Much as you need it! (NANCY *turns a pair of cold eyes at her, shrugging her shoulders contemptuously.*)

(*Exeunt EDITH and BELLA—Lights low.*)

NANCY (*alone*).

NANCY.....A harsh *finale* to a grating medley!—As if the furies all were let loose on me at once!—I am certainly out of tune with this concert of the Christmas spirit!—Am I, after all, headed in the wrong direction?—I have had a clash with everyone I have met to-day—and not all these people can be wrong—and I alone, right.—(*In looking over the room, she discovers the parcel on the seat of the chair.—Takes it up, takes out the veil and displays it, and goes to the door, looking out after EDITH and BELLA.*)—They are gone for good and all, this time.—Now I shall have to take Bella's veil—at least as far as the church door!—(*Lays the veil on the table.—In doing so, she discovers BELLA's rosary, picks it up, handling it gingerly.*)—Bella prayed—probably also for *me*—or, *exclusively* for *me*.—She is much concerned about my salvation.—(*Pause of deep thought.*)—After all this life of envy, jealousy, greed—(*looking up blankly*)—what?—It is not fair and just for me—to pluck the hot and harsh darts of disappointment from my own heart, and plunge them into the hearts of my fellow-men.—I have caused bitter suffering to-day.—I have been *rude*,—which is contrary to my habits and principles.—Yet, it

is—business!—(*Stands, staring into space.*)—An “un-holy” thing—Bella calls it!—And so it is!

ENTER FELIX. (*No illumination.*)

FELIX AETERNUS—Nancy! (*Softly.*)—(NANCY does not stir.)

FELIX AETERNUS—Nancy (*Emphatically.*)—(NANCY gives a start.)

NANCY.....What—what’s this? (*Turns quickly and looks terror-stricken at FELIX.*)

FELIX AETERNUS—Nancy—you are suffering.—You are not happy.—  
(NANCY drops her arms at her sides, and stares at FELIX in blank amazement.)—

NANCY.....Mercy, Lord!—(*Clasps her hands.*)—What is this!—It has the dying eyes of Agnes!—Is the child dead?—Mercy me!

FELIX AETERNUS—Be you merciful!

NANCY.....I have dealt naught but justice to my neigh—

FELIX AETERNUS—(*interrupting her—emphatically.*)—I want mercy—  
*Mine*—is justice! (*Taking a step towards NANCY.—NANCY retreats.*)—“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”

NANCY.....(*again retreating a step or two towards the table.—She turns her face away, and speaks under her breath.*)—I am not a wicked woman!—I have committed no theft or fraud—I—I—my God! (*Clasps her hands before her face, and sinks onto her knees at the table.*)

FELIX AETERNUS (*raising his right hand against her*)—God will examine your works, and search out your thoughts! x)

NANCY.....(*with hands raised in pleading.*)—O Mercy—do not crush me!

FELIX AETERNUS—Were it not for the prayers of Bella, and of her friends among the poor—you should be called to judgment this night—and your fate would be—*perdition!*

NANCY.....Who are you, child?—Pray (*passionately*)—who are you?

FELIX AETERNUS—(*raising a threatening hand.*)—Thy judge!  
(*Lights up.—NANCY swoons, clutching at the table, and rests her head on it.*)—

CURTAIN.

END OF FIRST SCENE—ACT III.

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x) Wis. VI, 4.

ACT III—SCENE II.

SCENE:.....*The same as in First Act.—1. AGNES is wearing the frock presented to her, and bed-room slippers. BESSIE and CATHERINE, sitting up with AGNES.—BESSIE is reading aloud the Christmas narrative from her bible history, as given below. CATHERINE is asleep at the side of AGNES' chair.*

2. BELLA is in white, without hat, her hair down. She wears the rose at her breast; the chain and cross, and a finger ring.

3. The curtains of the shrine are drawn.—FELIX is standing on the shrine from the beginning of this scene, holding a round wreath of white and green in his hands.

BESSIE.....(*seated on the arm of the chair—reading*).—"And there were in the same country shepherds watching, and keeping the night-watches over their flocks."—(*Turning to AGNES, and brushing over AGNES' face to rouse her.*)—Are you listening, Agnes?—They were doing just what I am doing for you—watching their lambs.—

AGNES.....(*heavily*)—Bessie, how late is it?

BESSIE.....It must be near midnight.—I heard the tramp of those who were going to church—some little while ago.

AGNES.....O Bessie!—I wish it were daylight!—This night is as long and slow as a funeral procession!—Why did you turn out the light, Bessie?

BESSIE.....(*jumps from the chair*)—Why, Agnes—I didn't.—Can you not see the light?

AGNES.....No, Bessie.—Are my eyes open?

BESSIE.....Surely, Agnes!—Wide open!—And you cannot see anything?—I think I will call your mother! (*Going out.—Aside, frightened*): The poor thing is dying!

ENTER MARION (*leading BELLA by the hand.—They meet BESSIE halfway across the room.*)

BESSIE.....Madame—please—hurry up!—Agnes is—(*stands disappointed.—MARION and BELLA pay but a moment's attention to her, and hasten to AGNES.*)

MARION.....See, Agnes, whom I am bringing you! (*BELLA kneels down at the side of AGNES and embraces her.*)

BELLA.....Agnes!—A "Merry Christmas" to you!

AGNES.....O Bella, Bella!—Thank you!—I was afraid I would never more see you before I die!—How good of you to come!—I have been longing *so much* to see you, Bella!—A *very* Merry Christmas to *you*!

BELLA.....It is rather late, Agnes, but it is not my fault.—I did not know that you were *so ill*.—The girls told us of your illness, when you did not appear at our little Christmas celebration.—

BESSIE.....Agnes, can you see Bella?

AGNES.....Yes, Bessie.—I can see you, too.—My sight is better since Bella has come in.

BELLA.....How do you feel, Agnes?

AGNES.....Bella, when I am with you, I always feel happy.—But I have not had a good night.—I am too drowsy to keep my eyes open.—Still, I do not want to die to-night.—I want to live until Christmas morning.

BESSIE.....Yes, Bella: we have to rouse her every once in a while, when she falls asleep.—A minute ago, I was *awfully* scared.—Do you think she will die to-night, Bella?

BELLA.....(*gives BESSIE a look of disapproval*)—Agnes, you shall not die!—(*MARION retreats towards the shrine, stands a moment, and exit.*)—I have some fine gifts here for you, dear friend. (*Takes off her chain and puts it on AGNES, and her ring.*)—

AGNES.....(*amazed*).—Bella, why do you do this?

BELLA.....I do not need them anymore.

AGNES.....I do not want your jewels, Bella!—Please take them back!

BELLA.....Agnes, I am making this gift to you with all my heart, and with full deliberation.

AGNES.....(*frightened*).—Bella!—Do you want to deck me out for my funeral!

BELLA.....(*smiling*).—Do not think of it, Agnes!—You will wear these things to church for *me* to-morrow, as I am wearing the rose of the Holy Child,—and shall wear it to-night—to Heaven. (*Shows and gives AGNES the rose.—AGNES curiously turns the rose in her fingers, and gives it back, incredulous.*)

AGNES.....Oh, no thought of it, dear!—I cannot even rise to my feet.—I am too wretched to leave this couch so soon.

BELLA . . . . . Agnes, I assure you—you will!

ENTER MARION (*with a rich silk frock*).

MARION . . . . . Look, Agnes, what Bella has brought for you!

AGNES . . . . . Look, mother, what she has put on me! (*Shows the chain and the ring.*)—

MARION . . . . . (*To BELLA.*)—'Mercy, child!—These things are too *costly* for you to give away.

BELLA . . . . . I shall wear more precious ornaments ere morning.  
(*MARION watches her anxiously.*)

BESSIE . . . . . O Bella!—Your people must love you a great deal to buy you such precious ornaments!

BELLA . . . . .—More precious still—the ornaments that I shall wear hereafter.—

AGNES . . . . . (*sympathetically, taking BELLA'S both hands*).—Bella, are you ill? (*BELLA shakes her head, smiling.*)

MARION . . . . . (*laying the frock on AGNES' lap*).—Bella, you are tired out.—Will you not rest a little—or stay with us until morning?

BELLA . . . . . (*arising*).—I am neither ill, nor tired.—(*Solemnly.*)—I am about to leave this world, and to go to Heaven.—

MARION . . . . . (*much concerned*).—Poor child!—You have overtaxed your strength ministering help to others.—Come, Bella!—Lie down for a few minutes!

BELLA . . . . . Madame, I beg of you: please, do spare yourself this needless concern about my health.—(*Aside.*)—Is the veil of this earthly life so dense—that no mortal eye can penetrate it, and see behind it—God?—(*To AGNES.*)—I know that I have seen Him face to face—

AGNES . . . . . O Bella, how can anyone see God!

BELLA . . . . . (*fervently*).—In prayer!—"Blessed are the *clean of heart*, for they shall see God,"—and *prayer does* cleanse the heart:—He has accepted my sacrifice.

MARION . . . . . What sacrifice did you make—(*reverently*)—dear child?

BELLA . . . . . I prayed to the Infant Savior—asking Him to take my life for the life of my dear friend here—(*at AGNES*)—and to grant the gift of charity to a certain soul—most dear to me.—Agnes, I shall be the *Christmas Bride* to-night—in *your* stead.

AGNES.....No, Bella! That cannot be!

BELLA.....I assure you, Agnes: you are the loser in this—our race for Heaven!

(MARION *turns away abruptly—weeping.*)

BESSIE.....Well, Bella, by this time the Mass must be nearly over.—If the Holy Child calls His bride at all, He calls her at the consecration.

AGNES.....Bella, I heard angels' voices to-night—

BELLA.....(*taking AGNES by the hand*).—The time is near.—Goodbye, Agnes!

ENTER NANCY.

(NANCY and BELLA *exchange glances of recognition, and bow slightly to each other.*—NANCY *has a parcel in her hand, besides a handbag.*—BESSIE *throws up her hands in dread of another clash.*—CATHERINE *hides behind the chair of AGNES.*)

NANCY.....(*humbly and warmly to MARION.*)—Allow me, madame, to bid you a happy Christmas!

BESSIE.....Oh, what a changed woman! (CATHERINE *comes forward.*)

MARION.....(*meeting NANCY*).—I thank you, Miss Rhoden—and it makes me happy to return the compliment.

NANCY.....I beg forgiveness of you, madame, for the pain I have caused you and your child this evening! (MARION *silently throws her arms around NANCY'S neck.*)—Thank you, Marion—from my heart!—(*Goes over, and kisses AGNES.*)

BESSIE.....Did you ever——! (*Brings hands together before her breast.*)—

AGNES.....O dear Miss Rhoden!—May God reward you for this kindness! (NANCY *pats AGNES' cheeks.*)

BESSIE.....Will you forgive me, too, Miss Rhoden—for the saucy words I used this evening—*please?*

CATHERINE...And me, too—Miss Rhoden?

NANCY.....Children, I have nothing to forgive you!—I should rather think of thanking you—for helping to bring me back to my senses.—(BESSIE *looks at CATHERINE, awe-struck, clasping her hands*—CATHERINE *does the same.*—Takes BESSIE and CATHERINE *together into her arms.*)—God bless you, dears!—Bella, I brought your veil.—(*Gives BELLA the parcel.*)—*I expected to meet you at the church door—*

BELLA.....(*joyfully accepting the parcel, and taking the veil out*).—O aunt, how dear of you! (NANCY goes over to MARION.)—(To AGNES.)—I will wear it as my bridal veil this day—and forever! (BESSIE and CATHERINE assist BELLA in putting on and pinning the veil.—AGNES watches with great interest. MARION and NANCY look on a few moments, then smile at each other, as over the “ceremony of children.”)

MARION.....(*aside to NANCY*)—Bella seems to make a great ado about her sodality veil?

NANCY.....Yes, indeed; and not without reason:—It would appear as if she has kept her purity and piety wrapped up in it.—But, Marion—let me now—(*takes a document out of her bag*)—offer you my Christmas gift: the deed of this house—without a string attached.

MARION.....No, no—! (*Pause.*)—

BESSIE.....(*loud and joyously*)—Bella, all you need now is a pair of wings! (BELLA raises a finger to her in friendly warning.)

CATHERINE...(to BESSIE)—Sh—!—(*Also raises her finger.*)

MARION.....No, Miss Rhoden!—Let us again be friends together from henceforward—and have patience with me—(*a sidelong look at AGNES*).—I am afraid, I shall soon be able to meet all my obligations.—Your goodness is too great! (*Pushes NANCY’S hand aside.*)

(*Meanwhile BELLA kneels down in front of AGNES, and quietly bids her stand up. AGNES earnestly protests and resists.—BELLA removes the coverlet, and takes AGNES by both hands.*)

NANCY.....Take it, please, as if the Lord Himself had sent it to you.—May He be merciful to me—as I shall strive hard to be kind to my brethren.

(MARION takes document, kissing NANCY’S hand.—Both retire a step or two, earnestly conferring together under their breath)—

AGNES.....(*raised up by BELLA—standing all a-tremble.—BELLA holds her by one hand. BESSIE and CATHERINE stand amazed, imitating the motions of AGNES.*)—Mother!—I can stand on my feet! (MARION quickly lays the paper aside, and rushes towards AGNES.—BELLA stops her with a wave of the free hand—and releases the hand of AGNES.)—

MARION . . . . . Agnes, you will fall!

AGNES . . . . . (*steadying herself, and taking a step forward*).—No, mother!—I think I can walk.—(*Takes another step.*)—I feel strong enough to run!

MARION and NANCY (*together*).—Merciful God!

AGNES . . . . . (*running to MARION and throwing her arms around her*).—I am well—mother!—Thank God—I am well!

MARION . . . . . How is it possible, Agnes?

AGNES . . . . . Bella bade me arise—in the name of the Holy Christ Child—I did as she told me—and here I stand—as well as ever!

MARION . . . . . (*devoutly*).—There is an angel in our midst!

BELLA . . . . . Yea, even Greater than all angels.—(*Points a hand at the shrine.—BESSIE and CATHERINE fall on their knees, fearfully regarding BELLA.—BELLA takes AGNES' hand, and leads her to the shrine where AGNES kneels down.*)—Let us thank the Holy Child for His mercy to you and His goodness to me!—(*The following Chorus sets in directly—soft and easy.—During the chorus, all are facing the shrine.*)

CHORUS.

15. O priceless treasure, the love of God,  
That is measured by Heaven alone!  
He stooped to embrace the humble clod,  
And set it upon His throne.

BELLA . . . . . (*turning to AGNES, who arises and takes her station at BELLA'S left, BELLA facing the audience*).—

It is a priceless boon, indeed, the love of God!—  
Goodbye, dear friends!—And bear my love to—

ENTER EDITH (*hurriedly*).

my mother! (*Flies to EDITH, kissing her. AGNES runs with BELLA.*)

(*EDITH slowly releases BELLA—looks wonderingly around; first at AGNES, whom she kisses on the forehead.*)—

EDITH . . . . . Why this silence and solemnity? (*No one moves or speaks, all eyes on BELLA.*)

BELLA . . . . . Goodbye, mother!

EDITH . . . . . What do you mean, child? (*BELLA silently points a hand aloft.*)

BELLA'S GOODBYE.

BELLA (*sings*).—16. There is no price in Heaven above,  
No value on earth here below,  
To measure the sweet and undying love  
That our loving God can bestow.  
The world—let it revel in empty delight—  
They court but death in disguise!  
I will keep the stars of Heaven in sight,  
Which direct me to paradise.—(*Piano stops.*)

And now, pray, dear friends, join me in my last tribute of  
gratitude to the Infant Savior!—

(*All surround BELLA and move up to the shrine*).—Agnes,  
come, let us open the shrine—to dedicate our lives to Him!

(BELLA and AGNES, *each at her side, draw the curtains  
back entirely.*)—Look, aunt!—Felix Aeternus!

(*All on their knees.*)

(BELLA *stands at the side of the shrine, but addresses  
herself to FELIX AETERNUS.*)

BELLA (*sings*): 17. O Happy<sup>x)</sup> Thou, Immense Delight,  
Eternal<sup>xx)</sup> God, my Savior bright!  
Take me—(*a step forward, with outstretched arms*)—  
I pray, into Thy house,  
Thy child to be—to be Thy spouse! (*bowing her head,  
and kneeling down on the floor*).

FULL CHORUS (*also those on the scene, except BELLA*).

18. Adeste, fideles, laeti triumphantes,  
Venite, venite in Bethlehem!  
Natum videte, Regem Angelorum, etc.  
(*as provided in the score*).

NOTE:.....1. At the beginning of the “VENITE, ADOREMUS,” FELIX  
elevates the wreath to the height of his eyes. This is the  
signal for BELLA to arise. She ascends the kneeler at the  
foot of the shrine, and receives the crown, or wreath, stand-  
ing. Then she descends, without turning away from FELIX,  
and kneels on the kneeler, and the “ADESTE” is sung to  
the end.

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x) Felix. xx) Aeternus.

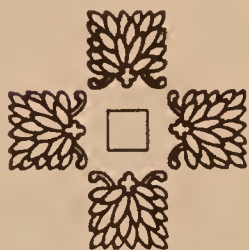
2. When the Chorus repeats the "NATUM VIDETE," BELLA arises from her knees and stretches out her arms towards FELIX.—Gradually her arms sink down, her head droops.—At the word: "DOMINUM" of the last line, BELLA wavers and gives a slight lurch backwards.—All up from their knees for an instant.—The Chorus sings the "ALLELUIA." EDITH and MARION grasp her at the arms, and gently let her slide down on the kneeler: BELLA (on her knees) lays her head on her left arm, holding her hands laid one over the other, at the feet of FELIX.—

3. The second stanza of the "ADESTE" is optional. But if it is to be sung, the directions given above for the first stanza, then apply to the second.

At all events, the ALLELUIA may not be omitted.

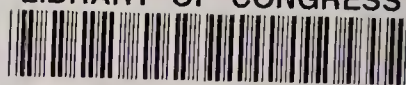
CURTAIN.

THE END.





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